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Classification Review Procedure

CRP 80-14


Application of the Mosaic Principle

1. CRD personnel reviewing documents for possible declassification should keep in mind the Mosaic Principle, the concept that individual documents which, by themselves, are declassifiable yet taken in aggregate become classifiable. This concept has been illustrated and proven on a number of occasions. The most notable example in CRD was the necessity to reclassify a large number of unevaluated intelligence reports produced by the DDO over a long period of time. Many of these reports, by themselves, could be declassified. But, when treated in large numbers they move towards becoming a larger and more explicit whole which can reveal a cornucopia of information relating to intelligence activities, sources and methods such as the strengths and weaknesses of collection capabilities in particular locations; the techniques of eliciting information; informational needs and requirements; liaison relationships; the size, organization, extent and direction of activity of a Station; possible identification of sources; and other revealing data. The Principle holds that seemingly innocuous bits of data, when collated and subjected to extrapolation and other techniques of a counter-intelligence specialist or other competent analyst, can reveal information of a sensitive nature that in the wrong hands could lead to the compromise of Agency operations, sources, activities, facilities, and personnel. This Principle must be kept in mind during our reviews to ensure that our declassification actions do not result in constructing such a mosaic.

2. A recent federal court decision supports the viability of the Mosaic Principle. In Florence v. Department of Defense the court held that separate items may be unclassified when considered alone, but when related to each other, may become classified as a combined document.

3. Application of the Mosaic Principle, by definition, will be difficult because one reviewer may not cover the scope of material that might be involved before the Principle went into effect. This is more of a problem with OIS/IPD because mandatory review requirements increase the probability of diverse individual sanitized or declassified documents later being assembled into a classifiable document. In the case of OIS/CRD personnel systematically examining large sets of records which have common job numbers, the possibility of the Mosaic Principle going into effect is increased. In any case, reviewers should communicate any concerns over the possible development of a classified mosaic to their fellow reviewers or supervisors so that appropriate retention measures can be taken before any questionable set of archival records is publicly released.

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